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CLIMATE, CLASS & THE GREAT FRONTIER

ALL CHEAP NATURE, CLIMATE, CPAITALISM, FRONTIER, WEB OF LIFE

From Primitive Accumulation to the Great Implosion

The commodity frontier has become something of a conceptual lodestar for students of commodity history over the past two decades. Many have implicated my early thinking on commodity frontiers and the rise of capitalism as a watershed moment in global environmental history. In a series of essays penned between 1997 and 2002, I outlined a historical geography of capitalism that foregrounded what Walter Prescott Webb once called the Great Frontier. Webb's

great insight was to grasp the history of capitalism as shaped fundamentally by a series of "windfall profits" that underpinned modernity's long boom – one that ended, for Webb, during the Great Depression of the 1930s.2 That diagnosis was not as absurd as it might seem. To be sure, Webb did not foresee how militarizedaccumulation and Cold War Developmentalism would produce new and robust "special stimuli" to gin up world accumulation in the postwar golden age.3 But he had grasped the nettle of the problem: world accumulation depends on frontiers of Cheap Nature; the closure of those frontiers ushered in new forms of economic instability and political upheaval. World-historical tendencies and world-historical turning points invariably enjoy a non-linear relation. There's always a crystal ball problem in play. And yet, the bookends of the long twentieth century suggest the intimacy of that non-linear relation. An era that began with a new imperialism and a "second" industrial revolution is closing in a planetary crisis marked by a triple closure: not only of the long twentieth century, but of the Holocene and historical capitalism.

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